The Original Independence of the Ezra Story in Ezra 7-10 and Neh 8

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The independence of the Ezra Story (= ES) in Ezra 7-10 and Neh 8 has been increasingly challenged in the latest research.[1] These chapters are seen as a product of their present context in Ezra-Nehemiah (= EN). They would not have a history prior to their inclusion in this composition. According to this position, the text of these chapters belongs to the latest phases in the development of the composition and can be interpreted as a reaction to and development of its older parts. In other words, it would be possible to understand the ES on the basis of Ezra 1-6 and the Nehemiah memoir (= NM; the core of the NM can be found in Neh 1:1-7:4).

This assumption is problematic and, in part, improbable for the following reasons:

Firstly, the redaction history of the book of Ezra clearly differs from that of the NM.[2] Successive editors who emphasized the role of the Gola in the community edited the book of Ezra, but one seeks in vain for their additions in the NM.[3] One receives the impression that the Gola editors did not edit the NM. Priestly and Levitical additions are met throughout the book of Ezra, but they are missing in the NM. In fact, priestly issues are almost non-existent in the NM,[4] especially in comparison with the book of Ezra. It seems

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[1] E.g., Kellermann, Nehemia 68-69; Kratz, Komposition 75-91; Grätz, Edikt 285-291, and Wright, Identity 86-93.268-269. For example, Kratz assumes that the core of the Ezra Story can be found in Ezra 7-8 and that Ezra 9-10; Neh 8 were, in many stages, added later. He seeks to show that the earliest core of Ezra 7-8 is dependent on Ezra 1-6 and Neh 1-7, although he regards it a possibility that Ezra 7:21f. contains an external source.

[2] The redaction history of the ES also differs from that of Ezra 1-6, but the differences are met in the earlier editorial phases; see below.

[3] For example, the word גולה occurs only in the book of Ezra (Ezra 2:1; 4:1; 6:19, 20, 21; 8:35; 9:4; 10:6, 7, 8, 16) and Neh 7:6 (Neh 7:6 was copied from Ezra 2:1).

[4] Successive Levitical editors were active in the book of Ezra, but in the NM the Levites are referred to only in Neh 3:17. Even in this verse, the Levites are not emphasized in any particular way. They are just mentioned in a list of people who repaired the wall. There is no reason to assume that Neh 3, commonly

that the Gola editors as well as the priestly / Levitical editors edited only the book of Ezra, but were not aware of the NM.[5] This suspicion is corroborated when we observe that Neh 8 was, like the book of Ezra, edited by the Gola editors (in v.13-17, 18b) and the Levitical editors (in Neh 8:7a, 9a*, 11, 12b, 13*). It would seem quite peculiar that successive editors first edited the book of Ezra then left the NM untouched and edited Neh 8. The only reasonable conclusion is that the NM was added to the composition only after the combined text of Ezra 1-6 and the ES, including Neh 8, was edited by the Gola and priestly / Levitical circles. This conclusion contradicts the hypothesis that the ES is a product of its current position between Ezra 1-6 and the NM. Much of the development of the ES (and the book of Ezra) must have occurred before the inclusion of the NM, which means that the ES was not created on the basis of the NM.

Secondly, only some additions of the ES are thematically connected with Ezra 1-6 (note that there are practically no thematic links between the ES and the Nehemiah memoir) and they belong to the latest editorial phases of the composition. This implies that the ES also had a prehistory prior to its merger with Ezra 1-6. Most of the thematic links between Ezra 1-6 and the ES are made in additions by editors interested in cultic, priestly and Levitical issues. The clearest links are found in two additions to Ezra 8, namely vv.15b-20 and 24-30. In fact, these two passages are better connected to Ezra 1-6 than to their context. With their interest in the Levites and temple vessels they digress from the general themes of Ezra 7-10. Literary critical considerations imply that they are later additions.[6]

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assumed as a later addition (E.g., Batten, Commentary 206-207), was added by the Levitical circles who were active in editing the book of Ezra and Neh 8.

5   Priestly issues are common in Neh 9-13, but these chapters were probably added, in many stages, after the NM and the book of Ezra were combined. These priestly texts differ from the older priestly and Levitical texts. The primary emphasis of the younger Levitical additions is on the specific tasks of the Levites. One should also note that there is no emphasis on the Gola in Neh 9-13, which implies that these chapters were added after the activity of the Gola editors. It is clear that these chapters utilize themes from different parts of the book of Ezra and the NM.

6   In addition to its thematic isolation in its context, technical details suggest that Ezra 8:15b-20 is an expansion. Verse 15a notes that returnees remained by the river Ahava for three days, but this is peculiar in view of the following events in vv. 15b-20 which could not have been carried out in such a short time: Ezra orders the leaders to search for cultic personnel in other towns. After the cultic personnel were found, they were also given time to prepare themselves for the journey to Jerusalem. The three days probably referred to the length of the fast which Ezra proclaimed in v.21. Verses 15b-20 broke the connection between the three

Thirdly, the incongruity and differences in themes imply that the ES has an origin outside EN.[7] If the ES had been created for its current position, one would expect it to fit much better. An author who has a free hand probably creates an expansion that relates to the older text in a harmonious way. Such an expansion, as a natural and organic development, would continue the older text in a fluent way. The advocates of the discussed hypothesis imply that the ES is a reaction to and development of themes and issues in the older text. If this were the case, how can one explain the existence of clear differences and incongruity?

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days and the fast. A small addition to v.21 corroborates that vv.15b-20 is an addition. Verse 21 unnecessarily refers to Ahava twice: שם and על־הנהר אהוא. The unspecific reference שם is original, for it would make no sense to add it, while the addition of על־הנהר אהוא can be seen as a clarification after vv.15b-20 were added. That שם referred to Ahava was originally clear, but after an editor added vv.15b-20, which also refers to another geographical location (Casiphia), the reference became unclear. Consequently, to avoid ambiguity an editor had to add על־הנהר אהוא. However, the addition was not entirely successful, because the שם was not removed. The final text contains both references.

According to Ezra 8:24-30, Ezra gave the silver and gold, as well as the cultic vessels, to priests to be carried to Jerusalem. The passage is thematically isolated within the Ezra story, but well in accordance with Ezra 1-6, where the reestablishment of the temple cult is a major issue. The secondary character of Ezra 8:24-30 can be seen in the way vv.21-23 function as an introduction to the departure from Ahava. The community prays and fasts for a safe trip to Jerusalem in v.21, after which, in v.23, they receive the confirmation that God had heard their prayer. These verses expect an immediate departure, but it is not before v.31 that the departure is actually described. The distribution of money and cultic vessels in vv.24-30 breaks the connection between the prayer and the departure.

The Artaxerxes rescript also links up with Ezra 1-6, but there are several reasons to assume that it is a later addition to Ezra 7. See Pakkala, Ezra 40-46, for details.

[7]   Thematic differences between the ES and the other parts of the composition are evident. The main theme of Ezra 1-6 is the building of the temple. There are sub-themes, such as the building of the altar or the bringing of temple vessels, but all passages in these chapters are connected to the main theme. The ES describes the reintroduction of the Torah: Ezra came from Babylon and read the Torah to the community in Judah, which had lived in lawlessness. Some passages in the ES deal with the temple vessels, but they are later expansions that try to combine Ezra 1-6 with the ES. The NM describes the (re)building of the ruined Jerusalem and especially its city wall. The themes of the book of Ezra cannot be found in this section. The three sections have one main theme in common. They deal with the restoration of Judah / Y ehud after the exile. They may have been combined in the same composition because of this similarity in theme.

Neh 8 is a good example. Hardly anyone can maintain that this chapter relates to the NM in an unproblematic and harmonious way. Neh 1-7 does not refer to Ezra or the Torah at all, but chapter 8, quite unexpectedly, introduces Ezra, who takes the lead in the community and reads the Torah. As it is shown by the history of research, the reader is bound to be puzzled by the relationship of Neh 8 to the preceding text. How do Ezra and Nehemiah relate to each other? When did Neh 8 take place in the internal chronology of the composition? It is no wonder that much of the research into these books has doubted the connection between Neh 8 and the NM. The question is, can Neh 8 be the product of an author who wanted to continue the NM? Similar doubts can be raised about the relationship of Ezra 7-10 and the NM, but Neh 8 is a good example, because there the disparity between Neh 8 and the NM, and thus the problems of the discussed hypothesis, are clear.

On the other hand, if the ES was an originally independent document that was later merged into the composition, differences and incongruence would be expected. Although some of the tensions could have been harmonized by long editorial activity, the originally independent profiles of the ES, NM and Ezra 1-6 would continue to stick out from the final composition. The assumption that the ES is an originally independent document secondarily placed with the NM into the same composition provides a better explanation for the differences and incongruence between the ES and the NM than the assumption that the ES was created for its current position.

Fourthly, the Ezra material is awkwardly connected to the preceding and ensuing texts. Ezra 6[8] and 7 hardly form a flowing transition between the sections. Ezra 6 concludes with a celebration of the Passover after the temple had been completed, but, without any introduction or thematically connecting element, the reader finds himself in Babylon with a scribe called Ezra. The ואחר הדברים האלה in Ezra 7:1 is only a poor attempt to connect Ezra 7-10 with the preceding text and does not bring the stories any closer.[9] In other words, one does not get the impression that Ezra 7 was created for its

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[8] This applies regardless of which verses of Ezra 6 are assumed to be original or to have concluded the chapter when Ezra 7 was added to the composition.

[9] The phrase ואחר הדברים האלה can be regarded as a later addition. The original beginning of this section is במלכות ארתחשסתא מלך־פרס, which is similar to the beginning of the book of Esther:ויהי בימי אחשורוש המלך. See also Bertholet, Bücher 30; Williamson, Ezra 91; Daniels, Composition 312; Pakkala, Ezra 23. The phrase ואחר הדברים האלה is used as if the events described in Ezra 7 had occurred immediately after the events of Ezra 6, but even if one were to identity the Achamenid king of Ezra 7 as Artaxerxes I, there is a gap of more than half a century.

current position, because in that case one would assume that the author would have created a smooth transition between the older text and the expansion.

The transition between Ezra 10 and Neh 1 is similarly awkward. Ezra 10 concludes with an annulment of marriages with foreigners, but, without any introduction or transition, the reader finds himself in the Persian royal court in Susa. If Ezra 9-10 had been created for its current position to be read before Neh 1-7, one would expect some connection to this story. Although later additions often try to create some bridges between originally independent stories, in EN one receives the impression that the editor(s) who placed Ezra 7-10 into its current position in EN was not very successful in this.

Fifthly, the chronological connection of the ES to the preceding and following stories is unclear. If the ES had been created for its current position, it is difficult to see why the chronological sequence of the composition is so puzzling. There is no flowing sequence, but instead, the text jumps between events in three different historical contexts: the latter half of the sixth century in Ezra 1-6, the middle of the fifth century in Ezra 7-10 / Neh 8 and events 13 years later in Neh 1-7. What happened between these periods is not told. If the author of Ezra 7-10 had had a free hand and created a story to fill the gap between Ezra 1-6 and the Nehemiah Memoir, the result would certainly be different. That the ES is chronologically independent and does not form a flowing sequence with the rest of the composition implies that the ES was connected to the seventh year of Artaxerxes prior to its inclusion in the current composition.

Sixthly, Ezra 10:16-44[10], according to which the mixed marriages were annulled, concludes the ES and does anticipate a continuation. Ezra's task, the application of the law in practice, is concluded. If the ES, or Ezra 10, had been written for its current context, one would not expect such a conclusion. The author would have left open some issues that were then later solved in the NM, which, according to the discussed position, should have been the context Ezra 10 was written for. On the other hand, if the ES were an isolated account without its current context in EN, one would not expect it to continue.

Seventhly, theories that assume Ezra 7-10 and Neh 8 to be dependent on other parts of Ezra-Nehemiah treat Ezra 7-10 and Neh 8, and especially Ezra 9-10, as an unedited unity.[11] This is hazardous because there is clear

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[10]   This argument is valid regardless of which verses are assumed to represent the originnal text. It is probable that in the oldest text v.17 concluded the chapter.

[11]   Kratz, Komposition 90-91; Grätz, Edikt 285-291, and Wright, Identity 86-93.268-269. Kratz presents his reconstruction of the literary development of Ezra 7-8, but Ezra 9-10 is generally treated as a unity.

evidence that these chapters were heavily edited.[12] Although the final text of Ezra 7-10 and Neh 8 contains several similarities with other parts of Ezra-Nehemiah, one has to investigate the relationship of each editorial phase in the development of Ezra 7-10 and Neh 8 separately. The latest editorial phases of Ezra 7-10 and Neh 8 are certainly dependent on other parts of Ezra-Nehemiah, but this says little about the earlier phases. That the earliest text of the ES and its first additions are independent of other parts of Ezra-Nehemiah can only be seen after a comprehensive literary critical analysis of these chapters.[13]

The reasons for the assumption that the ES does not have a history prior to its inclusion in EN are understandable. It is riddled with problems. The change of person between the first and third person accounts in Ezra 7-10 has not found a solution that is commonly accepted. The same can be said of the position of Neh 8. The story consists of several themes which do not seem to connect with each other to form a unity. In other words, it has been difficult to find a consistent story in Ezra 7-10 and Neh 8. Assuming that the whole story is dependent on Ezra 1-6 and the Nehemiah Memoir was an attempt to explain the lack of story. Passages in Ezra 7-10 and Neh 8 would variably react to the other parts of the composition. For example, Neh 8 would complement Neh 1-7: After the walls were finished the Torah was read to the community.

In my opinion, however, the main reason for the evident problems is very heavy editing, which has challenged the original consistency of the ES. Large and successive additions partially buried the themes and intentions of the original story. Some additions were primarily inspired by themes in Ezra 1-6 and may even be unrelated to their present context in Ezra 7-10 (e.g., Ezra 8:15b-20; 24-30). Such additions distract the original story and, if their number becomes too high, gradually break it apart.

The probable relocation of Neh 8[14] has further undermined the story. It broke the story's originally intended sequence. It is clear that such major editorial operations, additions and relocation of passages, made it extremely difficult for later readers to comprehend or even find the original story. Different themes and motifs compete in the final text. We can recover the original story only with a systematic and thorough literary critical approach.[15]

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12 See Pakkala, Ezra 89-103.
13 The recent advocates of the discussed theory have not presented a comprehensive literary critical analysis of Ezra 7-10.
14 For arguments for the relocation of Neh 8, see Pakkala, Ezra 167-175.
15 See Pakkala, Ezra 6-13.

In determining the position of the ES in Ezra-Nehemiah, one should look at the general picture and evaluate which hypothesis provides a better explanation for the problems we have: the one that assumes a history independent of the EN for the ES or the one that assumes the ES to be the product of its present context. Although the latter alternative may provide some compositional insights about the final text, it ignores many of its problems. The assumption that the core of the Ezra Story was originally independent provides a better explanation for them.

Summary

This paper discusses the increasingly popular contention that the Ezra Story of Ezra-Nehemiah is a product of its present context. It would not have a history prior to its inclusion in the composition of Ezra-Nehemiah. However, this paper demonstrates the problems of this hypothesis and seeks to show that an original independence provides a better explanation for many problems that the Ezra Story has in relation to the Nehemiah Memoir and Ezra 1-6.

Zusammenfassung

Die Unabhängigkeit der Esrageschichte wird zunehmend angezweifelt. In der neuesten Forschung wird häufig behauptet, dass die Esrageschichte erst aus dem Zusammenhang mit Esra-Nehemia entstanden ist. In diesem Aufsatz zeige ich die Probleme dieser Hypothese auf. Die ursprüngliche Unabhängigkeit der Esrageschichte bietet eine bessere Erklärung zu den Problemen, die die Esrageschichte im Verhältnis zur Nehemiadenkschrift und zur Tempelbaugeschichte in Esra 1-6 hat.

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